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NEWS

Gypsies win same rights as council house tenants

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BRITAIN'S 20,000 Gypsies living in caravans on local authority sites have won the same tenancy rights as council house tenants after a European court in Strasbourg ruled that summary evictions were against their human rights.

Local authorities previously had the right enshrined in law to evict Gypsies or travellers without having to prove any justification, and without those evicted having any right to challenge the decision in court.

But the European Court of Human Rights judged that this was against their fundamental right to "a respect for private and family life". It also said that not giving people in caravans the same rights of redress as people living in houses amounted to discrimination.

The court ruled that the Government had abused the human rights of James Connors, 49, a Gypsy from Leeds, who was evicted with his wife and children by Leeds City Council in a dawn raid involving police and helicopters. The court awarded him nearly £10,000, and £14,000 for costs.

The judges said that the "vulnerable position" of Gypsies as a minority meant that special consideration had to be given to their needs and their different lifestyle. "To that extent,

there was a positive obligation on the United Kingdom to facilitate the Gypsy way of life," yesterday's ruling said.

Mr Connor's solicitor, Keith Lomax, a partner in Davis Gore Lomax of Leeds, which specialises in helping Gypsies, said: "The change affects all gypsies on all Gypsy sites in England. Local authorities will have to justify eviction actions, and Gypsies can now challenge them in court. They now have the same rights as council tenants who are facing proceedings."

Tom Collins, of Justice for Travellers, a pressure group which supported Mr Connors, said: "It's great this ruling. It will make a huge difference for travellers, who are just moved around like sheep or cattle from field to field."

Leeds City Council declined to comment, saying only: "We will need to give consideration to the full judgment when we receive a copy. Until then it would not be appropriate to comment."

The Local Government Association, which represents local authorities in England and Wales, said that it could not comment because Britain was in an election period.

There are between 90,000 and 120,000 Gypsies in the UK, with about 41,000 living in caravans, according to estimates by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. About 20,000 of those live in

caravans in the 320 sites run and operated by local authorities, usually with amenities such as water and electricity.

Gypsies previously did not get tenants' rights on the sites, but were instead just given a licence to stay. The local authority, if it wished, could withdraw that licence at any time.

Mr Connors and his family were characterised in court as "Gypsies who led a traditional travelling lifestyle", who had for 13 years occupied the official local authority-designated Gypsy site at Cottingley Springs in Leeds.

In February 1997 they moved on, complaining about violence that made it unsafe for their children to play and the noise which disturbed their sleep. But within 18 months the family returned, giving up efforts to adapt to life in a rented house, and were again licensed to live on a site at Cottingley Springs.

Leeds City Council served a notice to quit on January 31, 2000, citing misbehaviour and "considerable nuisance" caused by some of the family.

Council officials and police arrived in the early hours of August 1, 2000, with helicopters and dogs, and evicted the family in a five-hour operation. The family has since been in effect homeless for four years, living in a caravan bought by friends but moved on by police almost weekly.